

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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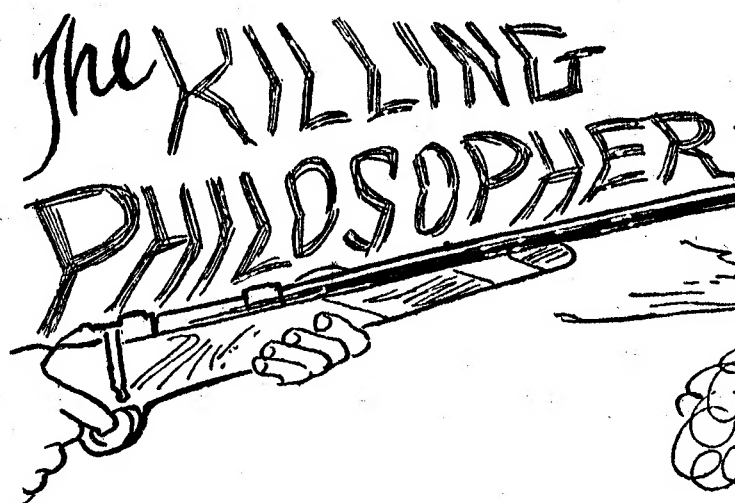
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*Apparently contemporary philosophy is not exclusively of
"hippie" inception.*



Jack
Ritchie

HE STOOD waiting in the doorway of the cabin and he seemed even to welcome us.

His eyes went over both Harry and me and he smiled. "Neat dark suits, conservative ties, black shoes. I expected as much."

"Would your name be James C. Wheeler?" I asked.

He nodded and still smiled.

Harry held up the wallet. "Did you lose this?"

"No," Wheeler said. "I did not lose the wallet. I intentionally left it beside the body."

Harry and I looked at each other.

"But come in," Wheeler invited.

We followed him inside. The cabin was clean and equipped only with basic furniture.

Wheeler reached for the coffee pot and removed the lid. "When did you find the body?"

"About noon," I said.

He spooned fresh coffee into the basket. "By the way, just out of curiosity, what was her name?"

"Carol Wisniewski," Harry said. Wheeler shrugged. "Even the

name means nothing at all to me."

I picked up the rifle lying on the cot and pulled back the bolt. A spent cartridge popped out onto the floor. "So you wanted to be caught?"

"Of course," Wheeler said. He put the pot on the small stove and turned on the bottled gas. "I am now forty years old and I have lived, by choice, in this cabin for almost my entire adult life." He blew out the match. "Do you think it has been a dull life?"

Harry shrugged. "I wouldn't know. Maybe you hunt and fish."

Wheeler shook his head. "No. I do not hunt and I do not fish. I indulge in the greatest adventure of all. I think."

He reached for his pipe and pouch. "I was just past twenty-one when my father died. He left me a small inheritance. Anyone else might have run through the money within a year or so, but I chose to come here. It has always been my natural predisposition to avoid the world. By living simply, I made the money last for almost twenty years. But now there is nothing left—nothing at all."

"What has that got to do with killing the girl?" I asked.

"Patience," Wheeler said. "And so I was faced with the prospect of having to go to work in order to live." He smiled broadly. "Oh, it

is not work itself that appalls me. It is the expenditure of time that the operation involves; time stolen from me and my thoughts. And one has only one lifetime, you know."

"Sure," Harry said. "She was fourteen years old."

Wheeler shrugged. "So finally I came up with the solution to my problem, the only solution. I would go to prison. There I would be fed and clothed, but above all, I would be given the freedom of time for speculative thought."

Harry had been examining the rifle. "You think that they won't make you work in jail?"

Wheeler smiled. "I have taken the time to investigate thoroughly your enlightened prison system. I will simply refuse to work. I know that no force or intimidation will be used against me. I will be placed in solitary."

"And you figure that a philosopher can do his thinking on bread and water?" I asked.

Wheeler lit his pipe. "As I said, I took the trouble to investigate. Solitary in this state means just that and nothing more. The meals served are identical to those given the other prisoners, and one is even allowed reading material." He smiled contentedly. "I think that I shall be supremely happy."

Harry put down the rifle. "You

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wanted to go to prison so you shot somebody to get there? Just like that?"

He frowned. "No. Not just like that. I planned and researched before I acted, and then this morning I went down the path that winds to the lake and waited. I shot the first person to come by. It happened to be this Carol Wisniewski. But it could have been anyone."

There was silence and his eyes went over us. "Do you think I am insane?"

"I don't know," I said.

He glared. "No, I am not insane. On the contrary, I have reached the ultimate in sanity, and that is to realize that nothing is really important except one's own wishes, one's own desires, one's own life."

"So the life of Carol Wisniewski meant absolutely nothing to you?" I asked.

"Nothing," Wheeler said. "Nothing at all." He laughed sharply. "I see that you have no use for me. Perhaps you are thinking that, if nothing else, it could be arranged that I 'accidentally' fall down a number of times before I reach

the police station environment?"

Harry and I said nothing.

Wheeler pulled a folded piece of paper from a book on the table. "This is a copy of an affidavit from my doctor. It certifies that I am in the best of health and, specifically, that I do not suffer from any bruises, contusions, or broken bones. Would you care to examine it?"

Neither Harry nor I touched the paper.

His eyes went over the objects in the room. "There is really nothing material here that I will miss. In fact, I am rather looking forward to the new leisure required for pure thought. You might say that I am actually engaged in distilling human existence to the length of one book; perhaps even one essay; one sentence."

"Or one scream?" I asked.

He seemed irritated. "We will not wait for the coffee. You may take me to your police station now."

My cousin, Harry Wisniewski, pulled the knife out of his pocket.

And I smiled. "Who the hell said we were cops?"

